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AUTHOR Hinnefeld, Joyce
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ABSTRACT

It is time for scholars in the fields of feminist theory and composition studies, taking off from the kinds of institutional critique that are at the very roots of their disciplines, to turn their attention to their own writing. What is it that makes "good" writing? How it is decided what is published and what is not? Despite the large numbers of women in the field of composition studies, white males still seem to control the publishing industry. To counter this perceived bias, many journals have now instituted a policy of blind review, but Theresa Enos asks whether blind review really stands to correct a long-standing bias if in fact women's ways of composing are different from men's. Another pressing issue in the world of academic publishing today is the dwindling market due to cutbacks in budgets. Interviews with editors at academic publishing houses shows that they are expecting to publish many fewer books in the future because libraries simply do not have the funds to purchase as many new books as in the past. These editors also spoke about the necessity of "accessibility"--the growing need for scholarly books to reach a wider and more general market than they have in the past. The time is ripe for scrutinizing some of the myths underlying the publishing industry, particularly the myth of equal chances. (Contains 12 references.) (TB)

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Joyce Hinnefeld
P.O. Box 393
New Baltimore, NY 12124
518/756-8182

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)"

ED 384 873

Feminism and Scholarly Publishing:

Perils and Possibilities

There are many unasked questions, and many unquestioned assumptions, about scholarly publication. This essay is intended to begin a discussion of ways in which principles from feminist theory and composition studies can be productively combined to address such questions and assumptions. Before getting into some of those principles, questions, and assumptions, though, I should acknowledge that I'm hardly a seasoned veteran of the world of scholarly publishing; I have just completed my Ph.D., and while I have published a bit of fiction and a few articles in some smaller venues, I see myself as, essentially, just preparing to enter the world that I'm going to describe. It is, I suppose, easy to be critical from this vantage point.

But before returning to graduate school a few years ago, I worked for a number of years as an editor, primarily in college textbook publishing. Within that context I became aware of the struggles of textbook authors for academic "respectability," of the perception that, compared to scholarly publication, their work was somehow tainted--purely market-driven, produced solely for economic gain, deemed unworthy when it came to tenure and promotion decisions. And this perception was probably true often enough. What I wondered, however, was just how untainted the world of scholarly publishing could truly be.

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When I returned to the academy, I thought perhaps this would be a topic of considerable interest and discussion. Not surprisingly, I suppose (since the very structure of the profession rests on a largely publication-based system of tenure and promotion), I didn't find many such discussions. In an article titled "The Gatekeepers: A Feminist Critique of Academic Publishing," Dale Spender identifies a need to open up for debate the "belief that there can be an objective process for assessing scholarly excellence" (196). Speculating about why people have remained silent on this topic for so long, Spender writes that "Perhaps there has been a 'gentleman's agreement' not to discuss (or disclose) the limitations of the existing system, for I can find few references to the matter in academic literature . . ." (196). "Gentlemen's agreements" of this kind have, of course, come to be perceived, by both feminist and composition theorists, as just the sorts of things we need to address--and dismantle. Hence my interest, and my desire to get such a discussion started.

Elizabeth Flynn has proposed that we are more sharing and relational when we compose as women. And Theresa Enos has speculated that beginning with a personal anecdote or narrative (as I have just done here) may seriously damage a piece's chances for publication (unless the writer is already well-known). As I've mentioned, I'm not well-known. So let me shift now--if it's not too late--to an extended quotation from the Introduction to a

recent book titled *Academia and the Luster of Capital* by Sande Cohen:

> Is there not something disturbing about intellectual work today? So many people are dissatisfied and repressed, one way or another, by the capitalist organization of knowledge. On every cognitive, theoretical, and critical side, so many doubts arise as to the value of criticism, while each new group of anti-intellectualism appears to stoke the 'need' for criticism. . . . Our privileges as professors are bound up with the criticisms of society that we intellectualize. (xx-xxi)

An awareness of the ways in which "our privileges as professors" are "bound up" with our "criticisms" is, it seems to me, a crucial component of the work of two relative newcomers to the academy: feminist theory and composition studies. Feminist criticism is more solidly ensconced, within the academy, than ever before. With its establishment there, however, has come an accompanying anxiety, even doubt, over what such institutional authority and security might mean for the project of feminism itself. "We don't seem very able to theorize," writes Jane Gallop, "about how we speak, as feminists wanting social change, from *within* our positions in the academy" (62).

Elizabeth Flynn has described composition studies as "a feminization of our previous conceptions of how writers write and how writing should be taught" (423). She also notes, though, in her 1988 article "Composing as a Woman," that "For the most part,

. . . the fields of feminist studies and composition studies have not engaged each other in a serious or systematic way" (425). Theresa Enos goes a step further in her research into what she terms the "poor ratio of male-to-female publication" in journals in the field of composition studies. There is a fundamental irony, according to Enos, in the fact that "rhetoric and composition has more females than males in the field, yet its publishing still is dominated by males" (314).

I'd like to propose going a step further still, in the direction that Enos's research points us. Namely, I'd like to propose that it's time for scholars in the fields of feminist theory and composition studies, taking off from the kinds of institutional critique that are at the very roots of our existence as disciplines, to turn our attention to our *own* writing. What if we asked the crucial questions--the ones that we've learned to ask so meaningfully and provocatively in relation to *student* writing--of our *own* writing: What is it that makes writing "good"? Who decides?

Another quotation, this time from a headnote to the article by Dale Spender that I cited previously; the headnote is by Helen Roberts:

> . . . much of our analysis of the way in which disciplinary paradigms are shaped and changed begins with the printed word, rather than with the processes that lead to it. The same could be said of feminism, for while feminists have been acutely conscious of the political dimensions in the

> construction of knowledge, they have often stopped where the printed word begins.

Perhaps no field of inquiry has been more inclined to go further, to *not* stop at the point of the printed word (at least, that is, in relation to student writing), than that of composition studies. One of the tasks Susan Miller sets herself in *Textual Carnivals*, for example, is that of debunking the image of the celebrated literary author as isolated and individualistic, unsullied by the messy details of textual production. I'm intrigued, though, by Miller's use of the term "consequential writing"--a term that, it seems to me, remains largely unexplored throughout *Textual Carnivals*. What is it, I wonder, that makes writing "consequential"? (I suppose this question intrigues me because I so often wonder about the "consequentiality" of my own writing. What kind of writing should I focus on--what's more "consequential," a short story or a critical article?)

Miller does note that

> Almost every attempt to make student writing more 'relevant' to experience outside the classroom undercuts itself by denying that the actual test of power (or 'effectiveness') from a piece of writing is how visibly it accomplishes precisely stated purposes among those who do not know its writer/author from immediate interactions. (103)

From this description I think we can conclude that "powerful" and "effective" writing, for Miller, is published writing. But it's

interesting, I think, to pose the question of just how often a reader approaches a piece of writing with the kind of openness, maybe even *innocence*, implied by the phrase "those who do not know its writer/author from immediate interactions." This calls to mind the tricky process of peer review at many scholarly journals, for instance--a process that many people have come to perceive as utterly biased in favor of the work of established (and in all likelihood, frequently male) scholars, in short the work of the already published.

To counter this perceived bias, of course, many journals have now instituted a policy of blind review. But do so-called blind reviews eliminate bias altogether? Dale Spender, who has been the editor of *Women's Studies International Quarterly* as well as a book series editor, acknowledges that "Before the reviewers select what is to be published, they themselves are selected and 'subjective' factors can operate here"; the appointment of such reviewers is, Spender notes, "not open or advertized but usually associated with 'contacts' and friends" (195). As an editor, Spender says,

> this constitutes something of a dilemma for me. If I like an article it is not difficult for me to 'choose' two reviewers who I suspect will also like it, and who will 'justify' my assessment; by the same token, if I do not like it, it is not difficult to 'choose' two reviewers who will not like it either. This hardly seems to be 'objective,' or even fair. (196)

And addressing the seeming gender bias in scholarly publication within composition studies, Theresa Enos writes

> Does blind refereeing ease suspicions of gender bias? Can it prevent such bias? I used to think so; but if, as recent research suggests, women's ways of composing are different from men's, could bias still be there? (312-313).

In her editor's essay in the Fall 1990 issue of *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, Holly Laird argues that "Feminist scholars might do more than they have yet done to research the politics of academic publishing and to worry through the pros and cons of participating in what remains a white-dominated and defined capitalist institution" (199). Laird raises here the important fact that a published scholarly text is, in fact, a commodity. Even a journal article, for which a scholar might not receive monetary payment, certainly functions to produce a kind of professional "capital," to be used in the acquisition of tenure or promotion, or perhaps of certain professional perks. But the area in which the published text is most clearly seen as a commodity is, of course, that of the publishing of scholarly books. And while university presses may have been able, at one time, to portray themselves as somehow above the fray of the commercial marketplace, the current economic recession, combined with a radical drop in library acquisitions of scholarly texts, seem to have brought those older, "purer" days to an end.

In the fall of 1993 I conducted interviews with several editors in the humanities at university presses. While there was

slight variation in the numbers they quoted, all of these editors spoke of a precipitous drop in the sales of scholarly books, brought on primarily by a sharp decline in library acquisitions. These editors were extremely vocal, and really rather grim, about the future of academic publishing. One of their arguments was particularly resounding; the system of academic tenure and promotion, with its unquestioned reliance on book publication, they said, is going to have to be completely overhauled.

These editors also spoke about the necessity of "accessibility"--the growing need, that is, for scholarly books to reach a wider and more general market than they have in the past. (And I should note that these are editors who, for the most part, are not speaking in terms of making a great profit; they are simply trying to break even.) To their remarks I'd only add that debates about theoretical jargon and opaque language aside, there is, of course, another kind of accessibility, one that has to do with the cost of books and journals. This is, I think, one of the hardest things for people in our profession to face about the work that we do: the fact that it is, like Diet Coke and like M-TV, a commodity. That is, in order for our work to continue, someone must, in some sense, buy it.

Let me raise some questions now, and then conclude with a brief note on why I think these questions are important. What makes *our* writing "good" ("consequential," "significant," "worthy of publication"--we all know the list of adjectives)? *Can* there be objective standards for determining the acceptance and

rejection of work for scholarly publication? If not, how can--perhaps *must*--the system of academic rewards for publication be changed? Or how might the system of scholarly publishing itself be changed (what possibilities, for example, might online publishing hold)? How might the work of scholars--particularly, for example, that of feminist critics--reach an audience outside, as well as inside, the academy?

To ignore such questions, I would argue, is to echo the cynical acceptance of the status quo that I hear in the conclusion of Alan Parsons (in his book *Getting Published: The Acquisition Process at University Presses*) that "The acquisition process, frankly, is not egalitarian and never will be" (201). To bolster such a conclusion, Parsons quotes a former editor at Harvard University Press (in, perhaps not coincidentally, the field of behavioral sciences), who says

> I suspect that editors and naive authors hold to the equal-chance myth for the same reason that most of us teach our children that all men in the United States are equal before the law: it is an important idea with an important social function. What really happens is sometimes fair and sometimes unfair, but without the ideal things would probably be worse. (quoted in Parsons, 201)

Fortunately, both composition scholars and feminist critics are engaged in shattering just such "myths" in the service of "important social functions." Perhaps we should turn our attention, now, to this particular myth--the myth of "equal

chances" within scholarly publishing, a myth that, along with others, can serve to perpetuate problems within this institution that we know we need to change.

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